

# Colombian teachers in 48-hour strike against school reopening plans

## Workers Struggles: The Americas

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

### **Colombian teachers strike for 48 hours over plans to restart classes**

The Colombian Federation of Education Workers (FECODE) called a 48-hour national strike for August 12 and 13 to protest the government's ordering of a rotating reopening plan for schools in some districts.

In contrast to previous protests, striking teachers for the most part stayed at home and did not congregate and march. However, in some cities, like Cúcuta and Cali, automobile caravans drove down major streets.

FECODE asserts that the main reason for the work stoppage is that the alternating model proposed by the Education Ministry does not carry guarantees for the safety of students and teachers. FECODE President Nelson Alarcón told *El Tiempo*, "The return to class isn't possible because of problems in the areas of infrastructure, protocols and elements of biosecurity." The federation has called for the declaration of an educational emergency that does not permit the return to in-person instruction until the pandemic is no longer deemed a health risk. Another demand, according to a FECODE statement, is "the complete fulfillment of the Agreements in favor of the educational community, subscribed between the government and FECODE in the year 2019."

### **Chihuahua, Mexico, bus company workers strike for return of full pay**

Workers at the Ómnibus de México bus company in Nuevo Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, walked off the job August 11 to demand full payment of their wages. Four months ago, management, pleading decreased ticket sales due to the COVID-19 pandemic, asked the workers to accept the halving of their wages, which they did.

Since then, with the opening up of the economy, business has picked up, but the workers have continued to receive diminished pay. They are demanding full restitution of their incomes, or at least an increase.

Workers also complain that Ómnibus is not complying with sanitary guidelines, and that the station is in a deplorable condition. They have had to purchase bleach and disinfectants out of their own pockets to try to keep the station clean. They also complain that there are not adequate hand-washing facilities.

The Ómnibus administration has not responded to their petition, though the director claims that he is looking for a way to come to a solution. The ticket window has been closed due to the walkout, though passengers can purchase tickets online and board the buses

unmolested. Meanwhile, Ómnibus workers in other locales in the state have joined the strike.

### **Colombian coal miners vote this week on strike over pay, conditions**

Workers at the huge Cerrejón open-pit coal mine in Colombia's La Guajira department began voting August 13 on the next steps to take regarding stalled negotiations with management. Negotiations between the Sintracarbón union and company representatives have reached an impasse over a number of issues, and the vote will decide the mechanism to address the conflict: an arbitration hearing or a strike.

A Sintracarbón statement says, "During 25 days of work with negotiators designated by the company, [the union] did not get a response to its petitions that it reduce [operations] adjusting itself to the special conditions of the pandemic." Negotiations had been taking place when the pandemic brought a temporary halt to production. The company has attempted to recover by implementing layoffs and increases in the level of exploitation. Of particular concern is a schedule of seven consecutive 12-hour days called the "schedule of death" by the workers.

Regarding other points of conflict, according to union head Igor Díaz, "Labor stability, decent income, responsibility for the health of the workers and communities affected by mining operations and opportunities for workers and their families constitute the central nucleus of the list of demands."

Mine workers had previously voted 98.8 percent for strike action before negotiations, which had been interrupted due to the pandemic. Talks were restarted by virtual means in July. The present voting will continue until August 20.

### **Uruguayan judicial workers strike to demand serious negotiations, end to job cuts and vacancies**

The financial sector council of the Association of Bank Employees of Uruguay (AEBU) called an assembly of members on August 12. The AEBU also called for four-hour work stoppages, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., this week. The actions follow a fruitless July 6 meeting between AEBU reps and the director of the Planning and Budget Office (OPP), in which the union argued for filling vacancies in the banking industry and against budget cuts. The director's response was that the orders had already been given and that it was not the job of the OPP to change them, but to carry them out.

The OPP has also carried out budget cuts to the University of the Republic, based on claims that its budget had increased while the number of graduates had not, a claim that the AEBU disputes.

### **Uruguayan interdepartmental transport drivers strike for 48 hours over stalled negotiations**

Uruguay's Unott transportation workers' union called a 48-hour strike in Tres Cruces, a neighborhood of Montevideo, beginning at midnight, August 14, to demand progress in wage negotiations. The strike covered all buses that arrive at and depart from Tres Cruces.

Drivers complain that their wages have fallen since the beginning of the pandemic, that layoffs have been imposed and that their jobs have become more insecure. Unott wants guarantees that they will have job security and "not be thrown out," union head Juan Arellano told *El País*. The workers also denounced the companies' refusal to grant licenses, vacation pay and bonuses.

Unott is also asking that workers on unemployment be rotated so as not to languish in idleness, but according to Arellano, "For the moment, the companies did not collaborate in doing the rotation."

### **Argentine health, education, judicial workers protest and strike over pay, benefit, bonus demands**

Following a meeting at the Labor Secretariat August 13 that failed to reach an agreement over pay demands, the Public Health Workers Syndicate (Sisap), which covers health care workers in Argentina's Chubut province, called for a 72-hour strike to begin on August 17.

The state government has not paid the workers their full pay for months, and workers have been unable not only to pay for necessities, but even be able to get to work. In addition, workers denounce the inadequate provision of personal protective equipment.

In Trelew, a city in eastern Chubut, members of Sisap, as well as the ATECh teachers' union, already held protests and strikes last week to demand pay, bonuses and benefits.

In Neuquén province, members of the SEJUN judicial workers union struck on August 13 and 14 to demand parity talks, payment of funds into the Social Security Institute and assurances that they will receive full payment of their end-of-year bonus.

### **Florida bus drivers holding strike vote as school district ignores safe social distancing on buses**

About 1,200 bus drivers and monitors for the Duval County public schools surrounding Jacksonville, Florida, are voting to authorize a potential strike as negotiations over protections for workers against the coronavirus have hit a snag, with 28,000 students preparing to use buses to return to school August 20. Members of Teamsters Local 512 had until August 17 to return their strike ballot to the union as balloting draws to a close.

The union is asking for pay for drivers who are forced to quarantine or test positive for COVID-19. Drivers are demanding protective equipment such as masks, gloves and hand sanitizer. But the gravest concern drivers have is adequate social distancing from students.

The Duval School District has openly stated, "Meeting CDC guidance for social distancing on a school bus is not possible." Superintendent Dr. Diana Greene argued that CDC guidelines "recommended one student per every other seat," meaning buses could only accommodate 9 to 11 students. "It would take us almost 10 hours to deliver our students," said Greene. Instead of recognizing the danger to students, teachers, bus drivers and parents, the district is pushing ahead with the reopening.

### **Norwich, Connecticut, nurses rally to demand safe staffing ratios and protective equipment**

Some 250 nurses and other health care workers and supporters

rallied August 9 outside Backus Hospital in Norwich, Connecticut, demanding safe staffing ratios and personal protective equipment. The rally comes after a contract extension expired on July 31, and negotiations are proving unproductive for the 400 members of the Federation of Nurses Local 5149 in talks with Hartford HealthCare.

Local president Sherri Dayton told the *Day*, "We're supposed to be working from, say, 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., and then maybe two hours before the end of your shift, they'll say, 'You have to stay four to eight hours more.' Sometimes these nurses are working 16-hour shifts. It's dangerous."

Nurses also complain that low pay impacts recruitment, which in turn affects nurse-to-patient ratios in the facility. The nurses are among the lowest paid in the region, while Backus Hospital makes more money than any other hospital in the state of Connecticut.

### **Montreal longshoremen enter second week of indefinite strike**

After staging three limited work stoppages since the beginning of July, 1,125 dockworkers at the Port of Montreal, organized by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), have entered their second week of an indefinite strike for job security and against grueling work rules and scheduling. Currently, longshoremen can be required to work 19 out of every 21 days on the dangerous docks. The longshoremen have been working without a contract since December 31, 2018. Workers voted by 99 percent to transform their limited job actions into an all-out indefinite strike.

Ships have been diverted to ports at Halifax, St. John and New York City with product, then transported overland into Quebec and Ontario. Due to restrictions imposed under the federal government's "essential worker" regulations, a small portion of the workforce are required to stay on the job during any work stoppage to process grain shipments as well as cargo bound for Newfoundland.

Business associations and the Port of Montreal's Maritime Employer's Association have lobbied for the federal government of Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to intervene with legislation to outlaw the strike, citing growing shortages of consumer goods amongst retail supply chains. Although Liberal Labour Minister Filomena Tassi has thus far encouraged the union and management to negotiate a settlement, she stated that the government is nonetheless "monitoring the situation closely." In an act of solidarity, hundreds of blue-collar workers employed by the City of Montreal who were protesting Mayor Valerie Plante's moves to privatize public cleaning services marched last week to stand with the striking dockworkers.

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